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ABSTRACT

Texas has spent nearly 2 decades in a slow, steady push for educational reform, and it has successfully adjusted its school improvement initiatives when initial attempts proved off the mark. The Texas record in terms of student achievement has been the subject of some scholarly, and much political, debate over the last 2 years, but this evaluation by Achieve, Inc., found strong evidence that greater numbers of Texas children are learning more now than ever before. Roughly 8 in 10 students now pass all 3 sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, and roughly 6 in 10 answer 85% or more of the questions correctly. Passing rates for students rise as they move through school. Improvement has come for all students, but Black and Hispanic students have made more rapid gains, causing the achievement gap between them and white students to close. Texas has also made gains when viewed through national and international lenses, as results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study show. To continue this trend, Achieve, Inc., makes these recommendations: (1) ensure that new state tests represent a more challenging expectation; (2) set the academic bar high; (3) pursue with new vigor the development of a world-class teacher workforce; and (4) guard against taking public goodwill for granted. The report contains three appendixes, including review team biographies, references, and a list of those interviewed. (Contains 158 references grouped by topic.) (SLD)

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Aiming Higher

Meeting the Challenges of Education Reform in TEXAS

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About Achieve, Inc.

Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help states and the private sector raise standards and performance in America's schools. Founded at the 1996 National Education Summit, Achieve has sponsored two additional Summits in 1999 and 2001.

Achieve helps states raise academic standards, measure performance against those standards, establish clear accountability for results and strengthen public confidence in our education system. To do this, we:

- help states **benchmark** their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- provide sustained **public leadership** and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- build **partnerships** that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- serve as a **national clearinghouse** on education standards and school reform.

AIMING HIGHER:

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION REFORM IN

TEXAS

A Policy Review
Prepared by Achieve, Inc., for
The Texas Education Agency

Achieve's Benchmarking Initiative
June 2002

ABOUT THIS REVIEW

Last year, Texas Commissioner of Education Jim Nelson asked Achieve, Inc., to organize an external review of education reform in the state. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) sponsored the subsequent education policy review. Achieve's review was designed to provide expert analysis of Texas' broad policy context and an outside and independent perspective on the status of the state's key education reform efforts. This report focuses on the state's role in four areas: setting and measuring higher academic standards; holding schools, districts and students accountable for results; strengthening teaching and helping schools and districts build capacity to implement reform; and sustaining public support for standards-based reform.

Achieve assembled a review team whose members had expertise in areas of particular concern to education leaders in Texas (reviewers' brief biographies are included in Appendix A). The review team analyzed a comprehensive set of written documents dealing with various aspects of the state's education system, with a special focus on recent policy initiatives (a complete list of these documents is provided in Appendix B). The review team then spent more than two days in Texas in July 2001 interviewing a cross-section of leaders from government, education, business and other stakeholder groups as well as senior TEA staff (a complete list of those interviews is included in Appendix C). The reviewers compared their reactions and impressions and contributed to the writing of this report. Although we invited TEA staff to review a draft for factual accuracy, the observations and conclusions in the report are entirely our own.

We are keenly aware of the limits of this kind of review and of the risks inherent in offering findings and recommendations based on such limited exposure to a rich and complex set of issues. We also acknowledge that, despite the very real progress we have made over the past decade in learning what works in education reform, there is much that we do not yet know. These caveats aside, we have attempted to provide state policymakers with our best judgment about the strengths of Texas' reform strategy, the successes Texas has seen to date and areas for improvement in the coming years. We greatly admire the willingness of Commissioner Nelson and other leaders to open their work to external scrutiny, and we hope that this report will prove helpful to those with policymaking responsibility for the education of Texas schoolchildren.

Achieve's work with Texas has included two other distinct activities. TEA asked Achieve to arrange for expert reviewers to determine whether the set of Proposed Objectives and Student Expectations for the state's new assessment were aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and were essential to measure on new statewide tests (which have since been named the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or TAKS). Achieve developed a set of guiding questions for reviewers tailored to each subject area and forwarded the individually signed reviews to the agency without review or comment. TEA subsequently asked Achieve to provide professional development for agency staff on the use of its full benchmarking protocol to verify the alignment of tests to standards. Unless specifically referenced in this report, those activities did not have bearing on our conclusions.

Education policymakers in Maryland and Massachusetts also asked Achieve to conduct similar reviews in 2001. Our Maryland policy review was delivered in January 2002 and can be read on Achieve's Web site (www.achieve.org). Our Massachusetts review will be completed this summer and also will be available on the Internet.

ABOUT ACHIEVE, INC.

Achieve, Inc., is an independent, nonprofit, bipartisan organization created after the 1996 National Education Summit by the nation's governors and business leaders to help states raise academic standards and improve schools. Achieve provides advice and assistance to state policy leaders on issues of academic standards, assessments and accountability. It has a small staff, augmented by a team of senior advisers, and conducts much of its work in partnership with other education and business organizations. Under the auspices of Achieve's Benchmarking Initiative, 17 states have sought Achieve's external reviews of state education policy issues since 1998.

To carry out the Texas education policy review, Achieve used a team of nationally respected experts: Ruben Carriedo, a senior research associate at the University of Michigan School of Education; Christopher T. Cross, the former president and chief executive officer of the Council for Basic Education; Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the John M. Olin Fellow at the Manhattan Institute; Wendy Puriefoy, the president of Public Education Network; and Susan Traiman, the director of the education initiative of The Business Roundtable. Achieve President Robert Schwartz and Executive Vice President Matthew Gandal co-chaired the review team. Jennifer Vranek, executive director of the Washington Partnership for Learning and former director of benchmarking and state services for Achieve, organized the review. Marian Robinson, a doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, prepared briefing materials for the review team and assisted in its work. Joseph Garcia, Achieve's director of public leadership, wrote this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The pride of Texans in their state's unique character and the accomplishments of its citizens is renowned. In the case of efforts to raise the performance of public schools and their students, this pride is well deserved. Both in terms of the longevity and the results of education reform, Texas has been a leading state in what has become a national effort to raise academic standards, measure results against them, and hold schools and students accountable for those results.

"Consistent," "reasonable" and "incremental" are all apt descriptions of Texas' strategy for improving its schools. The state has spent nearly two decades in a slow, steady push for reform. Texas' expectations for student achievement have evolved over time as evidenced by the series of tests the state has given stretching back to the mid-1980s. However, consistency has not meant complacency; Texas has successfully adjusted its school improvement initiatives when initial attempts proved off the mark, while always standing firm in the face of criticism on the ultimate goal of higher achievement.

The result is an educational system in which assessments, accountability and professional development are unusually well aligned to a set of standards judged by organizations outside of Texas generally to be clear and rigorous.

While harder to quantify than these pieces of the system, a belief in the ability of the state and its students to do what is asked of them academically has played an undeniable role in the Texas story. Schools and students have responded despite the absence of strong accountability consequences beyond public disclosure of their poor results.

While the Texas record in terms of student achievement has been the subject of some scholarly and much political debate over the last two years, Achieve found strong evidence that greater numbers of Texas children are learning more now than ever before. Roughly eight in 10 students now pass all three sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), and roughly six in 10 answer 85 percent or more of the test questions correctly. The passing rates for groups of students have risen as they move upward through grades in school. While improvement has come among all students, black and Hispanic children have made more rapid gains, causing the achievement gap between them and white students to close.

Viewed through national and international lenses, Texas' performance is noteworthy as well. Texas was among the states making the greatest gains in mathematics, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In writing, the state registered a "first" for the national exam — its black students outperformed white students in a handful of other states. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) found Texas falling at the national average despite its enrollment, which includes more minority and disadvantaged students than the United States as a whole.

But Texans themselves have not been satisfied with these results. Beginning with the adoption of a new set of academic standards in 1998, the state has pushed to raise expectations for what students know and are able to do. Texas has pursued this goal with an urgency that, in some ways, deviates from the steady, evolutionary path it has taken since the mid-1980s.

Policymakers believe that Texas has less luxury today in raising its bar at a deliberate pace. As a result, the Texas Legislature set an ambitious timeline for creating new tests and holding schools and students accountable for results.

Over the last two years, the nation has come to know the Texas-bred notion of "no child left behind." On this score, the state has seen some success in ensuring that all students reach a basic level of skills and knowledge. During the same period, Texas itself has been aiming toward a new target. By seeking to create a new generation of more challenging tests, broadening the indicators used to determine school accountability and largely maintaining benchmarks for student performance, Texas is attempting to ensure that no child is left without – without a higher level of skills and knowledge much closer to what economic and civic participation demand at the start of the 21st century. This is a tall order, even for Texas. And at the close of this decade, the state undoubtedly will be judged on how it responds to these higher expectations, rather than on its record to date.

As state government, education and the private sector work together to refine standards-based reform drawing on the successes of the last decade, we urge policymakers to focus their efforts on a few key goals:

✓ **Fulfill the promise of the 1999 education reform law by ensuring that new state tests represent a more challenging expectation for all students and schools.**

The Legislature's clear intention in its 1999 law was to leverage the progress made under the state's existing regime of tests and accountability to push schools and students to the higher expectations represented by TEKS. To do this will require the state to align fully the new TAKS to the breadth and depth of TEKS. Additionally, Texas must ensure that TAKS measures students' analytical and reasoning skills to a greater extent than the current TAAS. Failing to do so will cost the state an opportunity to set its bar based on 21st century expectations and could shortchange Texas children. In the case of the 11th-grade test, the state should leverage the statutory requirement to create both an expectation for high school graduation andone for college readiness. To accomplish this, the high school assessment will need to be sufficiently rich and rigorous to measure the knowledge and skills students need to be successful in college. In its effort to create the new generation of more challenging tests, TEA will be working in an unusually open environment. First, we urge the state to maintain its model practices regarding the transparency of its tests. Second, we recognize that this transparency will create inevitable and, ultimately, healthy comparisons of TAKS to TAAS. In an environment of full disclosure, Texas must be able to demonstrate that it has met the challenge of building better, more challenging tests — particularly to the many concerned educators and parents across the state.

✓ **Set the academic bar high — particularly in high school — and remain reasonable in responding to results.**

Texas has proceeded under the assumption that TEKS standards have been in place for four years and that schools have had ample opportunity to adjust instruction to address the skills and knowledge they represent. We agree with the assumption, but recognize that the state has opened a very narrow window for proving the premise correct. In its first year of use, TAKS will be used to determine promotion for third graders. High schools will experience one administration of the 11th-grade TAKS before students in the class of 2005 will be required to pass it to graduate. Preparing schools and families for the potential for results — at least initially — to be lower should be a top priority for Texas. The challenge will be to hold firm to high standards while being prepared to respond with targeted extra support for struggling students. To do this, Texas should set an unequivocal trajectory for bringing high school graduation and college readiness expectations in line. If pressure on the reforms grows unmanageable, the state should be prepared to make sensible policy adjustments. The one-year hiatus from school accountability ratings while schools get used to the new tests is an example of the state's willingness to make sensible adjustments. Another example is the fair but firm provisions for local appeals of retentions based on third-grade test results.

✓ **Pursue with new vigor the development of a world-class teacher workforce.**

The rigor of the state's new tests must be matched by new vigor in attracting and retaining well-prepared teachers. Stakeholders interviewed by Achieve's review team were essentially unanimous in their appraisal that shortcomings in the educator workforce are the biggest obstacles to ensuring Texas students reach more challenging standards. The state's teacher shortage and attrition problems are enormous. While starting teacher salaries appear competitive, they flatten over time making them less attractive for mid- and late-career teachers. There appears to be a need for differential pay to address shortages and to create new roles for the most effective teachers. Texas has its own successful examples of remedies to address issues in the educator workforce — an induction program, statewide initiatives in reading and math, and a system of regional service centers to reach across the state's wide geography. But all have been used in some limited fashion — the induction program touched only 10 percent of new teachers; the reading effort addressed only one subject in a few grades. Texas needs to arrive at a statewide teacher workforce strategy, even if the state's size and budget realities require the strategy to be targeted initially at the lowest-performing schools.

✓ **Guard against taking a wealth of public goodwill for granted.**

Standards, testing and accountability enjoy an unusual degree of support across Texas. Stakeholders share a common vocabulary and understanding of the history of these reforms in the state. But, as other states have seen, public support can dissipate quickly. As noted in this report, Texas is pursuing the next wave of reform at a faster pace than was the case during the 1990s. While the state appears to have strong lines of communication to the education community, it needs to take greater care to explain the transition underway carefully and completely to parents and the public. They need to understand why Texas must raise expectations and exactly how it is being done. Parents and the public will need to understand

why schools that had been "recognized" or "exemplary" are now only "acceptable," or why students who have passed TAAS in elementary and middle school cannot pass TAKS in high school. The issue of public engagement is especially pertinent given the potential for turnover in the executive and legislative branches of state government — however likely those changes are judged to be. In our view, business leaders must continue to play a strong role in anchoring public sentiment supporting high standards so that the reforms can be sustained over time. Public support may also be affected by re-examination of the state's school finance system. The current finance system appears headed for a collision with the Texas education reforms as school districts in which large numbers of students are not reaching proficiency — districts that are needy in an educational sense — are being called on through the "Robin Hood" formula to send local funds to districts that are deemed needy in the more traditional financial sense.

EDUCATION REFORM: THE NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Last October, governors, corporate leaders, state education leaders and educators gathered to shape the next phase of school improvement at the 2001 National Education Summit. The Summit meeting marked only the fourth time in American history that education policymakers have met to discuss common challenges and define common solutions — and the first time teachers and principals attended. These Summits have played a pivotal role in defining a consensus view to guide states' school improvement efforts.

In 1989, President George H. W. Bush and the 50 governors set broad, bold goals for the nation's education system at every level from early childhood through adult training and development. In 1996, governors and business executives committed to establish clear, challenging expectations for what students should know and be able to do in elementary and secondary school; regular measurement of student and school performance; and public accountability for results. In 1999, governors, CEOs and education leaders focused on concrete actions needed to make these ideas a reality in classrooms: improving the quality of teaching, strengthening accountability and putting in place the supports needed to help all students achieve high standards.

Participants at the 2001 Summit advanced three sets of principles to help boost student performance across the board while closing the achievement gap: improving state assessment systems to direct resources and support where they are needed most; developing firm, fair and balanced accountability systems that will guarantee all students an equal opportunity to achieve high standards; and creating and sustaining a top-flight education workforce while injecting responsibility for results into the profession. Educators and executives from government and business reaffirmed their commitment to the twin goals of excellence and equity in America's schools:

> We must raise achievement for all students while closing the achievement gap separating the educational "haves" from the "have-nots." These goals are an irreducible educational minimum for the United States. Nothing less than their full attainment will serve the nation's social, democratic and economic interests.

Many states have come a long way since the 1996 Summit. Virtually all states have put in place standards and tests to assess educational progress in the core academic areas, and nearly half are developing incentives and consequences for schools, districts and students tied to results. Yet, as standards-based reform enters its second decade, new challenges loom. No state has eliminated the achievement gap once and for all. Test results are just beginning to count for students and schools in most states. And while many students are learning more and test scores are gradually improving, more dramatic improvements are needed for all students to succeed. Public confidence in schools is rising, yet, at the same time, a small but vocal minority of reform critics are urging policymakers to turn back to the prestandards era. Most recently, the law governing federal involvement in schools — the Elementary and Secondary Education Act — will ask states to do more and do better when it comes to assessment and accountability. States will be held accountable to national policymakers for ensuring that schools make progress toward meeting standards, and new testing systems will be needed to gauge their annual progress.

EDUCATION REFORM: THE TEXAS EXPERIENCE

In Achieve's view, Texas is among a handful of states that has come the furthest in raising standards and achievement. The state's most recent push to improve schools traces back to 1984 and the landmark reforms recommended by the "Perot Commission." In the 18 years since, Texas policymakers and educators have worked enthusiastically and steadfastly to fine-tune reform, to raise expectations for Texas students and to make the high school diploma meaningful. There is strong evidence that Texas' reform strategy has shown measurable improvement in student achievement.

Texas has a history of serving as a model of reform for other states. House Bill 72, which codified the Perot reforms, was among the first state laws to raise high school graduation requirements and included the renowned "no pass, no play" provision governing participation in extracurricular activities. The state was among the first to test annually in nearly every grade and to report student achievement by ethnic group and socioeconomic status. Texas was one of a select group of states that could claim accurately to have standards, testing and accountability in place at the time of the 1996 Summit. There can be no doubt that the state's experience with annual testing and disaggregation of achievement data guided the drafting of the No Child Left Behind Act enacted in January 2002, which reauthorized the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

The question for Texas, as for most other states, is whether the rate of educational improvement is sufficiently rapid, especially given the pace of economic and technological change in the larger society. Texas is taking the next step in education reform in an effort to accelerate improvement in its schools. It will administer a new set of tests linked to a set of higher standards in a wider range of subjects and likely to create consequences for more students and schools. These changes are greater than the incremental adjustments Texas has historically made, and managing this transition represents the principal challenge confronting the state. Other policy challenges must be viewed in the context of this fundamental shift in approach by state policymakers. These include communicating with families, educators and the general public about the importance of staying with standards-based reform over the long haul; eliminating test score disparities; ensuring that the assessment system is well articulated; and coping with a looming teacher shortage while continuing to raise standards for teachers.

Given Achieve's interest in sustaining the standards-based reform movement in all 50 states, we must take this opportunity to note that, for better or worse, Texas will remain in the national spotlight when it comes to the agenda of standards, testing and accountability. The state's long record of leadership and, most recently, its part as an ancestor to the federal education law with which all states will have to contend deem this to be the case. The challenge Texas will face in the next few years — raising expectations for performance in a way that does not dry out its well of public support for high standards — is, essentially, the challenge all states will take on in responding to the No Child Left Behind Act. In our view, this places a unique burden on the policymakers and citizens of Texas and presents them with a special opportunity to influence the lives of children far beyond the Red River.

OVERVIEW

When Achieve's review team examined the Texas record, it was abundantly clear that few areas of education policy have been left untouched. Elected and appointed state officials have continuously challenged Texas public educators, parents, community and business leaders, students, and themselves to revitalize and achieve equity in public education. Through the administrations of five different governors and four state chiefs, as well as the transition of the Texas State Board of Education from elective to appointed and back to elective body, the state has created or revised solid policies and programs that support Texas' goal of high performance from every student and school. In our analysis, these policies add up to a rigorous view of schooling that should support most schools and students in reaching high standards. While the critical refrain heard from some about Texas is that only tests drive the education system, Achieve found a notable and unusual degree of alignment among standards, tests, curriculum, instruction, and teacher preparation and professional development.

Each state must address educational improvement in a way that is consistent with its own history, governance, political culture and demographics. Texas has much about which to be proud when it comes to education reform — most significantly the higher achievement exhibited by its students. The state chose to take a slow and deliberate course, which primed the system effectively. But policymakers believe they no longer have that luxury and that the reforms are established firmly enough to accelerate school improvement.

Texas is in the midst of taking its next steps toward better schools. There is an intersection of changes coming from many directions. Next year, there will be new tests in reading and math mandated to be more rigorous based on their direct connection to relatively new standards. More new tests will be added in science and social studies. In high school, tests will begin in ninth grade, and a new exit exam covering a broader, more challenging range of content will move forward at the 11th grade. Schools face additional criteria against which they will be held accountable. Students and schools may not initially measure up to higher expectations as they have against the existing ones.

The clear challenge for Texas is to ensure that this transition occurs in a way that draws on and does not discard the strengths of the state's reforms thus far. In our view, changes that the state will implement are appropriate and on target. But even change for the better can be difficult. Texas will need to strike a delicate balance in many key areas. The stakes will be higher not only for schools and students, but also for Texas policymakers.

There is a consensus within the state that Texas must move to the next level in its education reform, but real uncertainty over how that level will be defined. Questions about how new expectations surpass old ones are inevitable and unavoidable given the public's knowledge of the details of education reform. One way to address this issue is to compare the expectations to those in exemplars such as NAEP and the standards and tests Achieve has identified through benchmarking as the best.

Once the new expectations are in place, many stakeholders wonder how the state's schools and students will measure up. The standards on which the new tests are based have been in place for four years. School districts have had an opportunity to align their efforts to those standards. This is reason to be hopeful. Results from NAEP also offer positive signs. Texas may find, as Massachusetts recently has, that students are ready to satisfy higher expectations than previously thought. But if they do not, the state must respond skillfully in ways that preserve the goal of ratcheting up the rigor demanded of students as well as the public support reform has enjoyed.

STRATEGIES UNDERLYING REFORM

The Texas approach to school improvement has proven to be practical and sustainable. Over the last 15 years, Texas has followed a consistent, reasonable and incremental path toward education reform. This may seem like simple common sense — particularly given the successes that have come. Other states, however, have chosen different courses — notably pushing for higher achievement on a faster schedule.

At its core, the Texas strategy has been about measuring results for all students and holding schools and students accountable for them; these are common features of standards-based reform. The state has repeatedly chosen to set out expectations for students that do not appear on their face to be very difficult to reach or altogether unreachable. This has been the case both in the progression of tests about to culminate in the new TAKS and in the demands for school performance that have climbed gradually. This is the other aspect of the state's consistency — it has always made it abundantly clear that the bar is rising. Expectations that move steadily higher have grown to be a given in Texas reform. Against this backdrop, implementing a new test tied to more challenging standards seems a logical next step. However, making a leap — or at least a relatively large step — in expectations now may be more difficult given the history of small annual steps.

Other states might consider the expectations Texas set for school and school district performance in the earliest years of the current system so low as to be meaningless. In 1994, a school was deemed acceptable if just 26 percent of its students passed TAAS. In contrast to states that point students and schools at an ultimate — usually very high — target to motivate them, Texas met schools closer to where their performance rested at the time. In the first years of the accountability ratings, most schools reached only the acceptable level. But the fact that Texas erected a low first hurdle and raised it in what were quickly viewed as manageable increments appears to have inspired educators and, by extension, students. In the most recent ratings, more than half of Texas schools were rated recognized or exemplary, despite the fact that the criteria for earning those ratings have grown more demanding over the past eight years.

The review team noted a "can-do" attitude from educators and the public that has both been fed by the incremental approach taken by the state and has fed the demand to maintain the course of reform. It is difficult to quantify this cultural dynamic, but team members saw it as an important and unique part of the Texas story.

The consistency of reform witnessed in Texas has occurred on unusual political and social terrain. It goes without saying that Texas is a very big state, with few peers in terms of both population and area. In addition, its citizens have a long history of local control of schools. The state has 1,041 independent school districts; more than half have three or fewer schools in them. This structure renders daunting virtually anything the state could attempt to improve education for all students.

Socially, Texas is an unusually diverse state, and growing even more so. Its citizenry weave a rich tapestry of ethnic and racial backgrounds. There is a diversity of economic status as well,

with a sizeable proportion of children living in poverty. Texans live clumped in large urban centers and spread far across great rural expanses.

Politically speaking, education reform has remained a priority for Texans through the administrations of five governors — two Democrats and three Republicans. In fact, efforts to improve schools have avoided undue partisanship in Texas. Bob Bullock, a Democratic lieutenant governor worked with both a Democratic and a Republican governor to enact most of the reforms. In 1999, when the Texas Legislature agreed to ban social promotion and enhance the testing program, the House was controlled by Democrats and the Senate by Republicans.

Most inside and outside Texas point to a strong and vocal business leadership as a source of continuity amid this changing political picture. Through organizations such as the Texas Business Education Coalition, Texans for Education and the Governor's Business Council, the state's private sector has held firm on the agenda of standards, testing and accountability. When RAND studied Texas and North Carolina as models of reform for the National Education Goals Panel, it pointed to the consistency of business involvement at the state and local level as a vital source of stability for the Texas reforms.

The sustainability that is a strength of the Texas approach has required support from beyond the state's political and business leadership. Texas has strived to make educators part of the process of scrutinizing the performance of the education system. An example is the ongoing work to create TAKS. It started with educator committees defining expectations from the state's standards and included one round of surveys involving 27,000 educators and a second round involving 57,000 campuses further refining test objectives. There is undeniably widespread educator buy-in to testing and accountability in Texas. It is clear that a number of school districts — particularly in and around Houston, San Antonio, El Paso and Corpus Christi — have not only embraced the state's comprehensive view of reform, but also have pushed beyond it to move more students to higher standards. While Achieve has seen examples of similar efforts by districts in Maryland and Massachusetts, we were particularly impressed that so many Texas districts have reforms of their own that are deeper than what critics contend are the limits of the state's reforms. As with the "can-do" attitude noted above, this buy-in invariably raises the "which came first" question. The long and consistent record has given educators time to buy in; educators' acceptance of the components of reform has allowed them to stay in place in their basic form for a decade.

Consistency should not, however, be confused with complacency. Texas has moved to refine its reforms over time, particularly in the early 1990s when TAAS replaced the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) and accountability ratings were first made public. For example, the state eliminated a norm-referenced test given at that time and chose to focus on the standards-based TAAS instead. It made TAAS more coherent across grades by moving test administration to the spring in all grades. By the mid-1990s, Texas had begun revising its existing standards created nearly a decade before to come closer to the best examples available of a new wave of state expectations. The state has a schedule through 2015 for reviewing standards subject by subject and upgrading them as needed.

STANDARDS AND TESTING

PROGRESS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Texas is approaching close alignment of standards and tests for the first time. The current test, TAAS, predates the current iteration of state standards, TEKS. Five years ago, TEKS replaced the state's "Essential Elements." The standards have been judged by outside groups generally to be clear and rigorous. While Achieve does not grade standards across the 50 states, several other organizations do. These organizations — the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), *Education Week* and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation — have each generally praised TEKS in recent years. In the case of the Fordham Foundation, Texas was one of only five states deemed "to be doing standards-based reform well." On the other hand, AFT pointed to some gaps in TEKS in terms of specificity and clarity in its most recent report. Based on our informal review, while not perfect, TEKS represent a high level of expectation and sophistication that could translate to TAKS as well.

Even with a reasonably good set of standards, reform in Texas is still considered by many to be test-driven. This has been a source of criticism and has led to charges of "teaching to the test." When pressed, Texas educators acknowledge the problem may be most prevalent in troubled schools to which ineffective teachers were already assigned. If this is correct, teaching to the test may bring a desirable focus and may result in some learning taking place in schools where very little was present prior to the reforms. Certainly, while well aware of TAAS, educators and other stakeholders with whom the review team met were very familiar with TEKS as well. In addition, Spring Branch Independent School District and others have pushed beyond TAAS with their own classroom diagnostic assessments and lessons that are aligned to TEKS.

Few states can claim as long a history with statewide testing as Texas. But more important than this longevity is a clear pattern of evolution in the quality and rigor of the assessments. From the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills instituted in 1980 to TEAMS first administered five years later to the TAAS now more than a decade old, the state has made a concerted and conscious effort to demand more from students to perform well on its tests.

As their names make clear, the earliest two state assessments aimed to measure only the lowest skills. TAAS was created with the specific goal of measuring more higher-order thinking skills and problem solving ability. In relative terms, TAAS is a more challenging test than its predecessors. But when held up to current benchmarks, TAAS is no longer seen as a rigorous assessment; it contains mainly multiple-choice items and leans toward the less-challenging content in the state's standards. The high school exit TAAS is widely considered to measure eighth-grade skills and knowledge.

While the Legislature recognized the tests' limitations in 1999 and mandated new, more rigorous assessments that will be in place in 2003, it is worth keeping in mind that failure rates on TAAS hovered just below 50 percent just eight years ago. Even smaller percentages of black, Hispanic and disadvantaged students passed all three sections in 1994. At its start, TAAS was not an easy

test for nearly half of Texas students. The fact that many more students pass TAAS today is an unmistakable sign of the efficacy of the Texas approach.

In addition to carrying out this policy review, Achieve was asked by TEA to pull together experts of diverse perspectives to review the objectives to be measured on TAKS — in essence, a subset of TEKS. The purpose was to help the state in the important task of selecting the most critical curriculum expectations for the assessment. The work did not involve determining the quality of TAKS objectives, TEKS standards or any actual test items; Achieve forwarded more than 20 expert reviews directly to the agency without providing any view of its own. The exercise resulted in a variety of views from the experts, all of which have been available not only to TEA but to the public as well. The reviews led to reconsideration of some content (for example, treatment of the Civil War and the Magna Carta) on social studies assessments.

Challenges Ahead

Without question, standards and testing will remain at the heart of Texas education reform. For this reason, the starting point for the next phase of reform should be fulfilling the promise of the state's 1999 education law by ensuring that new assessments are rigorous and meaningful enough to set a challenging expectation for all students and schools. The Legislature's intent was to build on educators' track record of success and raise standards. In Achieve's view, this means that TAKS tests must be fully aligned to the breadth and depth of TEKS curriculum standards, and they must assess students' analytic and reasoning skills, not just basic skills.

TEA, charged with developing and implementing the state assessment system, is working to create tests that should be more rigorous than ever before. If they are not, the state will have lost its opportunity to set 21st century expectations for Texas public schools that would help make the Texas education system second to none. If the tests are well aligned to TEKS standards, Texas may be able to move some of the focus away from the assessments and on to the standards, which necessarily represent a wider array of skills and knowledge than can be measured on a statewide test. Texas has acknowledged this in defining TAKS objectives. There is a significant role to be played by local school districts in this regard, filling in with their own diagnostic assessments to create a system that is coherent but not duplicative. The Houston and Spring Branch districts are developing classroom-based formative assessments that can help teachers identify gaps in student learning. The state should encourage local efforts of this kind and find ways to identify and build awareness of best-practice models.

While Achieve facilitated a separate review of TAKS objectives, it did not benchmark the new assessments following the sophisticated protocol used to examine tests for other states. Achieve commissioned reviews of the objectives by experts from around the country, each of which was signed by the individual reviewer and delivered directly to TEA.

Achieve can say very little definitively about questions of old tests versus new ones under development. But based on our deeper work in other states, we can point to characteristics to which Texas should pay close attention:

- Standards need to show appropriate growth in skills and complexity of knowledge — always a challenge when standards are written grade-by-grade. This also translates to test objectives and the tests themselves, which must measure a progression of knowledge and skills from grade to grade without repetitiousness that leads to lower levels of rigor.

- Standards need to reflect the tough choices made about the most important content and skills to be mastered without narrowing the curriculum. In this regard, Texas may benefit from its participation in the American Diploma Project, which may allow the state to map backward from high school exit standards grounded in real-world expectations from colleges and employers.

- Standards — even relatively recently developed ones such as TEKS — should be the subject of continuous improvement. Texas has shown that it can successfully evolve expectations without completely recreating its vision of reform.

- Particularly in math, standards and assessments must not lose their rigor in middle school and high school. As TIMSS and Achieve's Mathematics Achievement Partnership (MAP) have shown, this is frequently the point at which American students fail to learn challenging content.

- Tests need to measure the depth and the breadth of the standards. To do this, the state may need to rotate the concepts it measures from year to year. This has the added benefit of deflecting criticisms about teaching to the test. In Texas' case specifically, a broader range of questions also may allow the state to satisfy its statutory need to set a passing score and a higher college-admissions score for the new high school test. This would be a desirable step closer to a standards-based benchmark in contrast to the current Texas Learning Index figures used for passing and mastery.

- As a whole, test items should assess both basic and advanced skills. This includes maintaining a balance of fact-based and open-ended items. That does not mean, however, that multiple-choice items cannot be used to measure complex knowledge and skills.

- The tests need to respond to content-specific issues. Reading passages should include vocabulary and be of sufficient length to allow rich questions to be posed about them; they also should include both fiction and nonfiction and a mix of genres and forms — novels, plays, poetry, periodicals, speeches, science journals and technical manuals. Math tests should measure the basics, but also elicit the problem solving and reasoning described in the standards — a difficult task for many states that is not solely an issue of format. Science tests should in part assess students' understanding of how experiments work. Social studies tests should include items that demand short written answers and longer essays.

- Test quality in terms of both the content measured and the types of items used should not be sacrificed for quick turnaround of results to schools. To be useful, test results must help schools improve their practices. However, the review team heard that TEA faces unusual pressure to score tests quickly and release test items. The process should be reasonable both for the state and for the schools. In Massachusetts, for example, the state releases results from multiple-choice items quickly, then releases results from written-response questions and final accountability ratings much closer to the start of the following school year.

Throughout the transition, the state must guard against losing any of the transparency that has been so important to its success. Educators and the public have the benefit of knowing well what is measured by TAAS and, inevitably, will make judgments about the rigor of new tests against that benchmark. TAKS must stand up well to this sort of scrutiny, which began even before a sample test was made public. For this reason, Texas might benefit from an external review of the new tests that would address their rigor and their alignment to TEKS.

ACCOUNTABILITY

PROGRESS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

At the 1999 National Education Summit, the governors and leaders from business and education identified several elements of comprehensive accountability systems: *student incentives*, such as graduation and/or promotion exams; *school report cards; ratings* that classify schools based on performance; *assistance* for low-performing schools to help them improve; *rewards* for highly successful schools; and *sanctions* for chronically failing schools. Texas is one of only six states that have put all these pieces together.

Texas has been particularly forward thinking in terms of rating the performance of schools and school districts. Few, if any, states or educators would openly argue with the statement, "All children can learn." Texas does far more than simply state that contention. Whether schools consider it a platitude or their sole purpose, they are judged by whether *all* children are learning. For many years, Texas was unique among states in not only reporting school, school district and state academic performance by ethnic group and socioeconomic status, but also in holding educators accountable for improving achievement by every group.

Some roots of the current accountability system trace back to repeated legislative attempts to revamp the school finance system. The tradeoff for more funding was greater responsibility for results. While the initial aims may have been this fiscal oversight and a drive for efficiency, it seems clear that the accountability system's landmark focus on the achievement of all groups has significantly added to educational equity in tandem with the dollars redistributed by the school finance law.

Texas' accountability system has always been a balanced one. It has included consequences for schools and students, mainly in the form of a high school exit test. It has included rewards as well as sanctions; the state awarded $2.5 million last year through the Texas Successful Schools Program. Both the exit test and the school rewards have been in place for a decade.

But in comparison to other states, the sanctions in the accountability system are relatively weak. While TEA has moved to take over a small number of schools, the actions have been prompted as much by management shortcomings as by academic failure. Accountability is not automatic as in some other states. In Texas, accountability relies almost entirely on the spotlight shone on poor performance. The review team was told that "shame works" in Texas, and the record seems to bear this out.

The clarity and simplicity of the accountability system appear to be important characteristics in this regard. The annual targets were in place from the start, with expectations rising by five percentage points per year in the case of the lowest rating. Those expectations were the same for every group of students.

Even more vital has been the transparency of the system. This is evident in a common language shared by those close to the schools from a variety of sectors. At its roots is a clear set of

standards. Also, anyone can know exactly what schools and students are being held accountable for because the state releases entire tests each fall. Texas releases entire TAAS forms each year. This costly practice was prompted by a lawsuit filed by parents seeking access to TAAS, but has proved worthwhile in building understanding of what TAAS measures. Educators get detailed item-by-item results and their students' essay responses sent to them. Teachers have the data, which is the first step in using results to act strategically to improve achievement. This transparency, which is also manifested in the inclusion of educators in test development as noted earlier, gives them an accurate sense that their actions can help students perform better — a powerful incentive. In addition, this transparency allows Texas to have what Harvard professor Richard Elmore describes as a "tight-loose" relationship with schools. The state is tight on educational outcomes, but loose on how content is taught. Because the content that is measured by TAAS has been extremely visible, the state has been able to rely on teachers to find the most effective ways to present it.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

At the 2001 National Education Summit, participants strengthened their commitment to firm, fair and balanced accountability systems in which all education stakeholders, including policymakers, are held accountable for raising student achievement. These principles go further than the accountability elements discussed in the 1999 Summit to offer sound advice for implementing accountability and include *adequate phase-in* to ensure sufficient time and support for schools to align curriculum and teacher professional development; *assistance before intervention* to provide targeted assistance to low-performing schools before intervening with more drastic remedies; *more flexible schooling* for students with the greatest academic distance to travel to meet standards; *sanctions* for chronically failing schools; *shared accountability* for both adults and students in the system; and *alignment with college admission and employment* so that the high school diploma becomes more than a piece of paper and signifies readiness for college-level work and high-performance jobs.

No state has achieved all these principles, in Achieve's view. Texas is one of only a handful of states with an accountability system that has met many of these criteria. In moving forward, Texas could benefit from using the principles to guide its efforts.

Adequate phase-in and shared accountability, for example, have long been components of the state's system. But the new higher standards and more challenging tests are likely to present greater demands on schools and students. In its next phase of reform, Texas will need to remain diligent in applying the principles it has satisfied in the past, in addition to seeking ways to improve its accountability policies.

For many schools, the combination of harder reading and math tests with broader accountability criteria that include tests in new subjects are likely to threaten their current accountability ratings. Tests and accountability have resulted in laser-like attention to reading, writing and math — the content covered by TAAS. Social studies and science may have been less emphasized in some schools, and they will be hard pressed to measure up immediately. In time, the addition of these subjects will benefit Texas students; mastery of science and social studies in addition to English and math represents a fuller educational background. In the short run, they will place

new pressure on educators. As a transition, the state will provide districts and schools with their 2003 performance data to allow them to improve while carrying over district accountability ratings from 2002. The state plans to preview the accountability system that will take effect in 2004 with additional reports to districts and schools using the 2003 results.

Another risk that Texas must consider in adjusting school ratings is the impact on transparency of adding criteria to the ratings. The expectations associated with these criteria should be as easy to understand as the passing percentages required to reach each school rating. The state should strive to maintain the simple elegance of the accountability system that has led to it being so widely accepted.

Many stakeholders with whom the review team met did not appear worried about the impact of the prohibition of social promotion from the third-grade set to go into effect next school year. In their view, the promotion ban for those not reading at grade level is very likely to pay off in terms of increased student learning. Legislators allowed for a thoughtful, locally driven appeals process for schools and families to deal with students who do not meet standards but in fact may be ready to move to fourth grade. Just as important, the state has made a major investment in early literacy. Nonetheless, Texas should be prepared to respond if large numbers of students face being held back.

The same optimism does not extend to the new high school exit test. The Achieve review team was consistently struck by the intractability of high schools to reform in Texas. This is the case in most other states; high schools are usually the hardest to transform. Even though the state has had consequences for high school students for a decade, because the exit exams were pitched at very basic levels, high school faculty and curriculum have been largely untouched in many schools. So the expectations of the TAKS 11th-grade exam may come as an even greater culture shock to some high schools. In addition, the state's continued use of course requirements to make distinctions among three different diplomas awarded may add to the resistance to reform in high schools.

This creates a dichotomy that represents a special problem for Texas. Its elementary school reforms are seen as models, but not its record in secondary schools. If the new tests show very large percentages of juniors failing, the result could shake confidence that reform is working, a view that has been fueled by rising TAAS scores.

That said, Texas has a history of successfully implementing exit exams that have passed legal muster, providing students with learning opportunities they may not have otherwise had and helping assure the public, professors and employers that Texas high school graduates have obtained minimum literacy and numeracy skills. The state has worked hard to align curriculum and coursework requirements and extra learning opportunities with the statewide assessment and accountability measures and has done so in a more public way than most states with which Achieve has worked. But Texas must guard against overconfidence based on its record; the state may find it an easier task to convince citizens that students should have at least eighth-grade skills to graduate from high school than to demonstrate the need for much higher-level skills. Results from the first administration of the graduation test in spring 2003 are likely to identify many students in need of additional instruction and assistance. In addition to the standards on

which TAKS is based being more rigorous than the expectations underlying TAAS, the new 11th-grade test is based on English, math, science and social studies courses typically taken in grades 10 and 11. State leaders and educators are already anticipating that considerable numbers of students will not pass all four examinations on the first try.

This challenge should not deter education leaders from staying the course with higher graduation standards. In our view, Texas has approached raising standards and achievement in a measured and sensible way, starting with relatively low standards for graduation and moving over time to increase rigor. Texas students now should be expected to demonstrate mastery of high school material in order to earn the high school diploma.

Yet state policymakers must be willing, as they have been in the past, to approach this challenge with some caution and make midcourse corrections or put in place additional supports for students and schools as needed. Part of the Texas record is a history of being able to tweak reform without losing momentum or public support.

There must be time and support for TEA to make appropriate adjustments to the tests as needed, or to create supportive, common-sense policies regarding test administration, such as allowing students opportunities to take the exams before 11th grade if they have completed the relevant coursework. The state may need to consider an appeals process for the high school exit test that is both fair and stringent, as it has done with the promotion requirement in elementary school. New support programs for students who are struggling to meet the standards, such as giving them intensive summer experiences or asking community colleges to provide additional learning opportunities to students who do not earn the diploma by the end of their senior year may be needed. The same is true for elementary schools if the new promotion bar proves too high for many students.

The review team agrees with what appears to be the state's fundamental premise — TEKS has been in place since 1998, thus schools have had time to prepare students for a higher bar. If this assumption is correct, then most Texas students should perform well on the new state tests, and Texas schools should be able to pick up next year at nearly the point they stopped for last year's accountability ratings. If experience runs counter to this assumption, the system is strong enough in our view to accommodate reasonable responses. The two clearest responses involve adjusting the expectations so that students must cross a lower threshold initially or adjusting the timeline for when those expectations have consequences. Based on our review of the Texas record, it appears that setting a reasonable level of achievement that students initially must reach on TAKS to be considered proficient, and then consistently raising that expectation based on a prescribed schedule, is in keeping with the state's past approach.

Our recommendation in this regard is in part shaped by the provision in state law that requires the establishment of a TAKS score for college readiness in addition to the TAKS bar set for high school graduation. When it comes to the college readiness expectation, Achieve would not sacrifice rigor, even for a short period. That bar should be set as accurately as possible, guided by the state's work through the American Diploma Project (ADP). Texas' participation in ADP offers an excellent opportunity to deal with the challenge presented by the exit-level TAKS. Texas law requires the Texas State Board of Education to work with TEA to determine the

passing score for the diploma. It also requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to set a higher standard on TAKS for use by Texas colleges and universities. By partnering with Achieve, the Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the National Alliance of Business, Texas will be in a position to anchor these decisions in the actual academic content needed to succeed in first-year college courses and at entry-level jobs that lead to careers in a given field. This will render TAKS more relevant and may lead to a reduction in the overall volume of testing in high school.

Texas then can create an unequivocal trajectory to raise the high school graduation expectation to be in line with the college readiness expectation over time. Again, this is in keeping with the state's history; it was clear from the start of the school accountability ratings that the bar would raise each year until the acceptable rating would require at least 50 percent of students to be passing TAAS. Similarly, clear, reasonable but challenging incremental movement toward alignment of the two TAKS expectations should be the state's goal.

We believe there will be strong public sentiment behind alignment of the bar for exiting high school and entering college or high-skills workplaces well prepared. Texas may find that parents have little tolerance for an enduring mismatch between what the state requires to leave high school and what the state knows is required academically to succeed in first-year college courses or in its best jobs. The need for continuing remediation of high school graduates once they reach the state's colleges and universities will eventually erode public trust in the reforms.

In this way, Texas can take an important step to bolster the higher high school expectations by extending responsibility for results beyond the K–12 education system. The Texas Business and Education Coalition already has worked with several communities to start projects that allow them to support students pursuing college preparatory courses of study.

CAPACITY BUILDING

PROGRESS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Accountability has worked, as it should in an important way in Texas. It has provided a laser-like focus on reading and math in its effort to improve schools. The state's expectations are unmistakable and transparent, so schools can act strategically in moving to reach them.

The criticism most frequently leveled at the Texas reforms — particularly by observers outside the state — is that they are too test-focused. But Achieve's observation is that much more has been attempted in Texas to align standards, tests, curriculum, professional development, student supports and educator preparation than in states where reform is considered less test driven. The "Perot" reforms, which strengthened statewide testing, also set class-size limits in kindergarten through fourth grade — an initiative RAND found to be linked to the state's admirable achievement gains. The state also requires full-day kindergarten and has slowly opened access to pre-kindergarten.

In the area of teacher preparation, Texas has made great strides in requiring prospective teachers to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter they will teach and on which their students will be tested. Teacher education programs are held accountable for their students' results on these measures, which are tied specifically to TEKS. Higher education generally has been a ready and useful resource as the state has pursued reform.

While establishing this bar for entry into teaching, Texas also has tried to invest wisely in professional development for teachers already in the classroom. The best example is the Texas Reading Initiative. The state made a large investment to provide professional development in literacy for all teachers in kindergarten through third grade. The foundation for the training was a set of early literacy standards that are national models. Teachers were taught to utilize a research-based classroom assessment to diagnose reading difficulties among their students. A math initiative also is underway.

While Achieve had no means to confirm their views independently, many educators praised the state's use of regional service centers as an effective vehicle for carrying out professional development.

Texas' alternative certification initiatives are a national model as well. These programs combine strong academic coursework, mentoring, working with other candidates and field-based learning. Alternative certification has been particularly successful in helping to address teacher shortages in high-need specialties such as bilingual education and special education and to increase diversity in the teaching ranks.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

While some may debate the merits of TEKS or TAKS, there was a clear consensus heard by the review team about the status of Texas' educator workforce. Many people across various sectors in the state express concern that Texas will lack the qualified, dedicated teachers and principals needed to help students reach higher standards. In their view, the state faces a severe teaching shortage and other challenges to attracting and retaining an outstanding education workforce. Every group of stakeholders interviewed by the review team called this a major roadblock in reaching new, higher academic expectations.

All Texas educators must be prepared to help all students reach higher performance levels based on the state's challenging curriculum standards and measured by TAKS. Yet it is not at all clear that the state or school districts are prepared for the challenge to educators that TAKS represents. In our view, Texas needs a statewide strategy to address teacher quality, which could draw on the array of entities positioned to help implement it — TEA, regional service centers, the educator certification board, universities and school districts.

Teacher shortage and attrition problems are enormous; while the state seems to do an adequate job of attracting teachers, teacher retention is a potentially fatal weakness. About one-third of the state's teachers leave the classroom within three years. *Education Week* reported two years ago that only 75 of every 100 newly certified teachers go into the classroom within two years, and only 35 are still teaching after five years. A projected wave of retirements is expected to create a teacher shortage from the other side of the career path.

Salaries for starting teachers appear to be relatively competitive, but are so flat over time that veteran teachers are underpaid compared to their counterparts in other states. More must be done to make teaching attractive as a career — from start to finish. Differential pay may play an important role in this regard. This should be approached in several ways. First, specialties experiencing chronic shortages need to be addressed. This may be particularly important in secondary school math and science, given new testing requirements. In addition, the schools most in need should be made more attractive to the state's most effective educators through salary incentives. Finally, the wealth of data Texas collects opens a strong opportunity to pursue "value-added" bonuses to effective schools or pay-for-performance incentives for teachers.

Professional growth is another important piece of enhanced capacity. Texas can build on the success of its Reading Initiative in this regard. A Math Initiative is now underway and should be carefully scrutinized to ensure its effectiveness. While an example of strategic focus, these initiatives involved only two subjects and a few grades. Standards will be higher in all grades and in four subjects when TAKS is administered. Texas may need to find other ways to address these additional needs and likely will need to redouble its efforts. In the case of reading, the initiative presented a set of knowledge and skills that some teachers viewed as overly prescriptive. In subjects other than reading, efforts that both maintain an unequivocal focus on demonstrable effectiveness and promote collaboration with teachers may be beneficial.

The Reading Initiative used a train-the-trainer model to have sufficient reach across a large state. TEA may want to investigate other models and audit the impact of the professional development

it provides. On the surface, the delivery system that includes the 20 regional service centers and TEKS-focused educational development centers appear to be adequate, but the review team was presented no data on their effectiveness beyond customer-satisfaction surveys.

Texas has other successful models for raising teacher quality. The state received the largest federal grant to create an induction program for first-year teachers. But thus far, only about 10 percent of the state's new teachers are receiving support through the Texas Beginning Educator Support System. Texas also is experimenting with the Teacher Advancement Program supported by the Milken Family Foundation, which creates differentiated duties for teachers as they progress in their careers.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

PROGRESS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

There is a surprising consistency to the story of reform told by many different groups of people in Texas. Different audiences share a common knowledge and history of the steps Texas has taken to improve schools, right up to the coming switch from TAAS to TAKS. This is an important trait. A common view of the past allows Texans to keep dialogue focused in the present.

This shared understanding is a result of the transparency of the testing and accountability systems, in our view. In addition, the state has been diligent in reporting results. The media in Texas also have played a role by providing extensive coverage of school ratings and testing.

The state also has taken bold steps to expose its own weaknesses. It was one of only 13 states to participate in the TIMSS benchmarking project, in which states and large school districts took part in a global comparison as if they were nations. Texas was the first state to require school districts to inform parents if their children were being taught by a teacher with an emergency license or no license at all (although the state stopped short of requiring the same notification in the instance of out-of-field teachers).

Texas also has benefited from the interest of civic leaders in engaging the public. Tom Luce, a Dallas lawyer who worked closely with the Perot Commission, founded an organization called Just for the Kids in 1995 to help communities rally around improving public schools. Just for the Kids quickly turned to the wealth of data produced by the Texas testing and accountability systems as the foundation for public engagement. The organization has pushed for an even higher view of performance than the state's accountability system, focusing on the percentage of students in a school reaching the proficiency mark on TAAS, rather than simply passing the test.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

In considering how Texas can take its next steps, it is worth noting that the state is actually trying to pull two policy levers at once. It is changing assessments and raising expectations for school performance at the same time. This has not been the case in the past. Pursuing this course is likely to force Texas to dip deep into the well of public support it has filled over the last decade.

Given the changes that will take place in the next two years, Texas needs a well-executed plan to engage parents and the public to sustain their support. The belief is strongly held that education reform has been working in Texas, but it could be shaken by widespread failure on new, more difficult tests unless parents and the public understand fully the changes the state has made. Without a plan to raise awareness, the push for higher standards may derail. While there appears to be a communication strategy around TAKS when it comes to educators, this appears less the case where the public is concerned. While this high level of communication between state officials and educators in the field is notable and stronger than in many other states, Texas must reach out directly to all families as well as civic leaders in communities that are likely to be

affected heavily by the changes in tests and accountability. An intensive public engagement strategy should begin immediately, perhaps led by a third-party organization, which will build on the state's tradition of two-way communications between state policymakers and education stakeholders.

Within the education community, those especially interested in gifted and talented and special education issues need to be urged to support standards-based reform. Texas should strive to hear their concerns and respond in ways that do not diminish the broader reform agenda. For example, after consulting parents of gifted and talented students, Virginia is allowing students to substitute Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exam results for state test results to satisfy graduation requirements. This sort of accommodation allowed the state to reduce opposition to reform without undermining its high standards.

As many states can attest, political and public consensus around education reform can be a fragile proposition. Texas has enjoyed unusually strong consensus around its specific reform strategies. It enters a new phase of reform, however, at a time of potential political transition as well. Texas will elect a governor later this year. A new state commissioner has just taken office. Redistricting could significantly change the face of the Legislature. Any of these shifts could imperil the state's vision for reform.

These political changes place added responsibility on the business community and education leaders to continue to give voice to the need to press ahead with standards, testing and accountability. This anchoring role may be unusually important in the next few years.

Public engagement always is a difficult task in a state as geographically large and demographically complex as Texas. Public officials are critical in defining and presenting a unified message about reform. Through this lens, contentiousness can make the hard transition Texas faces in the coming years all the more difficult. While there is always room for respectful disagreement, it is essential that policymakers, including the State Board of Education, keep the public dialogue about raising standards constructive. It is, for example, more important to keep the focus on assuring the high quality of the state's new tests than on the management of their development.

ACHIEVEMENT GAINS

It seems appropriate to use Texas' own approach to evaluate Texas reforms. With that in mind, the review team considered the results measured through state and national assessments in an effort to hold the state accountable for its reforms. From this perspective, Texas has registered impressive success.

The percentage of students passing TAAS has climbed steadily since 1994. Roughly eight in 10 Texas students now pass all three sections of the test. Looking longitudinally at groups of children shows that these rough cohorts have done better on TAAS as they have progressed through the grades. For example, 70 percent of the children in third grade in 1997 passed all three sections; in 2001, when the same group of students reached eighth grade, 80 percent passed TAAS. In addition, Texas students are answering more questions correctly on TAAS. In math, for example, more than six in 10 students master 85 percent of the test. That compares to fewer than two in 10 in 1994.

Even while TAAS passing rates have climbed, the achievement gaps between white and minority students, and between disadvantaged and more affluent students, have closed significantly. All groups of students are performing better on TAAS, but minorities and the disadvantaged have steadily made up ground. On the 10th-grade reading test, for example, the improvement in black and Hispanic passing rates has more than doubled the improvement among white students. All this has occurred as the state population has expanded and grown more diverse.

In some ways, the question of teaching to TAAS should be a moot issue. In a standards-based system in which the standards and test are well matched, teachers teach what is in the standards, which is also what is on the test. While the alignment in Texas is by no means perfect, it is strong enough to explain why students are performing better on the state's own test. External measures, however, show that real learning has gone on in Texas. A RAND study of NAEP math results for the first six years of the 1990s showed that Texas was second only to North Carolina in producing annual achievement gains. More recently, the 2000 math NAEP results showed that Texas was among the states recording the largest gains over the last decade and also had shown the most progress in closing the black-white and Hispanic-white achievement gaps. On the 1998 NAEP writing exam, black Texas eighth graders outscored white students in seven states — a first for "the nation's report card."

The pattern extends to the TIMSS benchmarking study as well. Texas and most other states bunched near the U.S. and international averages. But only Michigan — a less diverse state both ethnically and economically — had a higher average score than Texas. Texas students were over-represented at the top of the international distribution — with 13 percent of Texas students in the international top 10 percent and 37 percent of Texas students in the top 25 percent.

Critics of the Texas system frequently look past these achievement results to argue that the high-stakes accountability for students — the TAAS high school exit test — has forced many more students to drop out. We found several compelling and well-executed studies that refute this criticism. In a paper for the Consortium on Policy Research in Education, Martin Carnoy and

colleagues at Stanford University found a positive relationship between rising 10th-grade TAAS results and declining dropout rates, a trend that was strongest in urban high schools. Both the Education Trust and the Manhattan Institute's Center for Civic Innovation have examined the high school completion picture in Texas. Each study calls into question the claim that the state's dropout rates have skyrocketed under the accountability system. In a reported commissioned by The Business Roundtable, the Education Trust reported that high school completion rates have actually grown in Texas, reversing the trend nationally. While the completion rates for whites and Hispanics hovered just below the national average, the completion rate for black students was 7 percentage points above the national mark. While critical of the annual dropout rate reported by TEA, the Manhattan Institute's report nonetheless showed Texas was among the top 16 states for both black and Hispanic graduation rates, while ranking only 26th for the white graduation rate.

Participation rates in higher education, however, present a troubling picture. While the participation of minorities rose in the 1990s, blacks enroll at roughly half the rate of whites, and Hispanics at roughly two-thirds the rate of whites. As a result, the percentage of Texas' total population participating in higher education — 5 percent — falls below the national average and at the middle of the group of 10 most populous states. While other factors help shape these trends, the state should be mindful of them as it continues to fine-tune elementary and secondary education reforms.

BEYOND THE CURRENT REFORMS

Two issues that extend beyond standards, testing, accountability and capacity building, but that could have significant impact on Texas' efforts in those key areas, emerged during the review team's work.

The first is explosive population growth. The state's population grew by nearly one-quarter in the 1990s. In particular, educators and others noted important shifts in Texas' immigrant population. Immigrants — parents and children alike — are arriving with much less education from their native countries, particularly when it comes to language proficiency. This presents an even greater challenge in moving them to high standards in this country. Many stakeholders with whom the review team met mentioned this trend as an emerging challenge to the state's trend of narrowing achievement gaps.

The other is Texas' murky school-finance outlook. While they often are viewed as separate tracks, the state's "Robin Hood" school-funding law has begun to collide with its education reform initiatives. School districts such as Austin and Dallas that have identified educational needs have reached a level of local property wealth that requires them to send tax dollars to other jurisdictions. In most states, there is an unfortunate tendency to deal with school finance issues separately from school reform, when in fact the two paths are inextricably linked. This was not the case when Texas established the Robin Hood provision; school finance reform drove the call for greater accountability for academic results. As it enters a demanding new phase of standards-based reform, Texas may need to flip that equation — the needs established by model education reforms may need to drive the debate over a new school-finance system.

CONCLUSION

The consistency demonstrated by Texas policymakers in regard to education reform since 1984 would have yielded little in the way of better student performance if the state had not stayed the course on thoughtful and comprehensive policies and programs. An incremental strategy would not have made a difference if Texas had asked too little of its students and schools. Texas is undoubtedly in the vanguard of education states. Yet looming change will yield challenges that must be met by invigorated and sustained leadership.

To continue to succeed, Texas must maintain its key commitments — high standards for every child, accountability for results and transparency in reform — and do even more in creating an education workforce capable of implementing serious reform. That may take a reconsideration of past practice, flexibility in responding to new conditions, and new or redirected resources. Change may not be popular. But it is necessary for Texas to continue to make substantial progress in improving its schools.

This report does not represent a detailed blueprint for the next phase of education reform in Texas. Our hope is that the state's policymakers — the governor, the legislators, the commissioner, and the state board — will find this report instructive as they draw the state's blueprint. By examining the state's efforts over the last 18 years and by identifying work that remains to be done, Achieve hopes to help Texas move into a new phase of education reform grounded in higher expectations for all students. We believe that not only the eyes of Texas, but also the eyes of the nation, will be watching carefully and optimistically.

APPENDIX A: REVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES

RUBEN CARRIEDO

Ruben Carriedo currently serves as a senior research associate at the University of Michigan School of Education. He is part of the Study of Instructional Improvement, a comprehensive longitudinal study of instructional interventions at 125 elementary schools across the country. Dr. Carriedo has been a teacher, coach, counselor, and secondary school and central office administrator in New York City and San Diego public schools. He served as the assistant superintendent for the Planning Assessment, Accountability and Development Division in the San Diego City Schools from 1987 to 1999.

He has served on the California Assessment Program Policy and Technical Advisory committees, the New Standards Project Technical Committee, the National Advisory Panel for the Center on the Reorganization and Restructuring of Schools, the National Advisory Panel on Chicago School Restructuring, the PACE/Rockefeller Project Advisory Committee, the Editorial Board of the *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis Journal,* and the Advisory Committee of the Learning, Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. He currently serves on the TIMSS-R Technical Review Panel, the Advisory Committee on Education Statistics at the National Center for Education Statistics, the Trustee Committee on Research and Development of the College Board, and the Title I Assessment Committee at the National Research Council and National Academy of Science.

He has worked as a consultant to the Spencer and MacArthur foundations and Booz Allen on Chicago school reform. In addition, he has consulted with the Ford Foundation to plan a national symposium on assessment and equity. He also served as a member of the national evaluation panel for the Children Achieving reform initiative in Philadelphia.

Dr. Carriedo received his doctorate from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

CHRISTOPHER T. CROSS

Christopher T. Cross is an independent consultant based in California. Previously, he was president and chief executive officer of the Council for Basic Education (CBE). Before joining CBE, Mr. Cross served as director of the Education Initiative of The Business Roundtable and as assistant secretary for educational research and improvement at the U.S. Department of Education.

Mr. Cross chairs the National Assessment of Title I Independent Review Panel on Evaluation for the U.S. Department of Education and a National Research Council Panel on Minority Representation in Special Education. He chairs the board of the Center for Education Policy and is a member of the board of directors of the American Institutes for Research. He serves on the board of trustees of Whittier College, the board of visitors of the University of Maryland College of Education, the Board of International Comparative Studies in Education for the National Research Council, and chairs the National Council for Education and Humanities Development of George Washington University. From 1994 to 1997, Mr. Cross served as president of the

Maryland State Board of Education. He also was a member of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning.

He has written extensively in the education and public policy areas and has been published in numerous scholarly and technical publications, including *Education Week, Kappan, The College Board Review, The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times.*

Mr. Cross has a bachelor's degree from Whittier College and a master's degree in government from California State University, Los Angeles.

CHESTER E. FINN JR.

Chester E. Finn Jr. is the John M. Olin Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, where his primary focus is the reform of primary and secondary schooling.

He also is a fellow at the International Academy of Education, a distinguished visiting fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution and an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute, where he worked from 1995 to 1998. From 1992 to 1994, he served as founding partner and senior scholar with the Edison Project. He has been professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt University since 1981 (he currently is on leave). From 1985 to 1988 he served as assistant secretary for research and improvement at the U.S. Department of Education. His earlier positions include staff assistant to the president of the United States; special assistant to the governor of Massachusetts; counsel to the U.S. ambassador to India; research associate in governmental studies at the Brookings Institution and legislative director for Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Dr. Finn has authored 13 books and more than 300 articles.

Dr. Finn received a bachelor's degree in U.S. history, a master's degree in social studies teaching, and a doctorate in education policy and administration from Harvard University.

MATTHEW GANDAL

Matthew Gandal is the executive vice president of Achieve, manages the Washington, D.C., office and is responsible for overseeing Achieve's major initiatives. These include the 2001 and 1999 National Education Summits and a series of follow-up activities Achieve has launched to help states address the Summit challenges; the Benchmarking Initiative, which helps states compare their standards, assessments and accountability policies with those of other states and nations; the Mathematics Achievement Partnership (MAP), which is designed to help states improve curriculum and instruction in middle school mathematics and measure student achievement using a common, internationally benchmarked eighth-grade test; and the American Diploma Project.

Before joining Achieve, Mr. Gandal was assistant director for educational issues at the American Federation of Teachers. Mr. Gandal helped AFT launch a variety of programs and publications designed to support standards-based reform efforts in states and school districts. He was the author and chief architect of *Making Standards Matter,* an annual AFT report evaluating the quality of the academic standards, assessments and accountability policies in the 50 states. He

also authored a series of reports that compared student standards and achievement in the United States with those of other industrialized nations.

Mr. Gandal, a graduate of the Maryland public school system, earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.

WENDY D. PURIEFOY

Wendy D. Puriefoy is well known for her passionate advocacy of education equity for poor and disadvantaged children and has written and spoken extensively on the issues. She has been president of Public Education Network (PEN), the nation's largest network of community-based school reform organizations, since PEN was founded in 1991. Under her visionary leadership, PEN has grown into a national network of local education funds reaching more than 6 million children in 300 school districts and 8,000 schools nationwide.

Ms. Puriefoy has been deeply involved in school reform since the 1970s, when she served as a special monitor of the court-ordered desegregation plan for Boston's public schools. As president of PEN, Ms. Puriefoy has successfully advocated and implemented systemic reform initiatives in school finance and governance, curriculum and assessment, parent involvement, school libraries and school health. With support from leading national foundations, PEN recently launched multi-million dollar initiatives on teacher quality, standards and accountability, and schools and community services.

Prior to her work at PEN, she was executive vice president and chief operating officer of The Boston Foundation, a community foundation with an endowment of over $750 million supporting public health/welfare, educational, cultural, environmental and housing programs in Boston, Mass. Ms. Puriefoy currently chairs the board of the Ms. Foundation for Women, and serves on the boards of numerous high-profile national organizations including the Pew Forum on Standards-Based Reform, Hasbro Children's Foundation, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the Milton Hershey School and the National Center for Family Philanthropy.

Ms. Puriefoy received a bachelor's degree from William Smith College and holds three master's degrees in African American studies, American studies and American colonial history from Boston University.

MARIAN ROBINSON

Marian Robinson currently is a doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. From 1994 to 1998, Ms. Robinson was an education program specialist with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, where her work focused on research and development activities related to standards-based reform (primarily state standards and assessment development), charter school accountability, and national research agenda planning. Early in her career, Ms. Robinson was an assistant English teacher in the Seino District Education Office in Gifu, Japan, during which she provided curricular and instructional support to 12 schools.

Ms. Robinson's current graduate work focuses on governance and organizational change issues related to standards-based reform. She holds a bachelor's degree in English literature and history and a master's degree in comparative education studies from the University of Virginia.

ROBERT SCHWARTZ

Robert Schwartz has been president of Achieve since 1997. Over the previous three and a half decades, Mr. Schwartz has had a rich and varied career in education and government. He has been a high school English teacher and principal; an education advisor to the mayor of Boston and governor of Massachusetts; an assistant director of the National Institute of Education; a special assistant to the president of the University of Massachusetts; the executive director of the Boston Compact, a public-private partnership designed to improve access to higher education and employment for urban high school graduates; and a lecturer on education at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

From 1990 to 1996, Mr. Schwartz directed the education grant-making program of The Pew Charitable Trusts, one of the nation's largest private philanthropies. Among the major reform projects initiated during his tenure at the Trusts were New Standards, a voluntary national system of student performance standards and assessments developed jointly by the University of Pittsburgh, the National Center on Education and the Economy, and 17 partner states; and the Pew Network for Standards-Based Reform, a collaborative venture among seven medium-sized school districts committed to systemic reform based on high academic standards.
Mr. Schwartz has written and spoken widely on such topics as urban school reform, public-private partnerships and the role of higher education in K–12 reform.

He holds degrees from Harvard and Brandeis Universities and continues to serve as a part-time faculty member at Harvard, where he teaches a course each spring on educational policy and administration.

JEAN SLATTERY

Jean Slattery has been a consultant for Achieve since 1999 and currently serves as Associate Director for the Benchmarking Initiative. She was supervising director of curriculum development and support in Rochester, N.Y., from 1989 to 1997, with responsibility for overseeing the work of all subject-area directors in the K–12 instructional program. Her earlier responsibilities as a district-level administrator included serving as director of the middle school (1987–89) and junior high (1985–87) programs. During this period, she initiated Teachers as Partners, a peer-coaching staff development program funded by the Ford and Matsushita (Panasonic) Foundations.

Dr. Slattery also is a peer consultant on standards and assessment for the U.S. Department of Education. She has served as a consultant to the Washington, D.C., school district; San Diego Unified School District; a Washington state consortium of rural schools; and the Alabama and Illinois Departments of Education. Dr. Slattery also has worked for CBE on projects involving the Flint Community School District, the Nevada Education Department and the Cleveland Municipal School District.

Dr. Slattery received a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Albertus Magnus College, a master's degree in science education from Yale University and a doctorate in science curriculum from the University of Rochester.

SUSAN TRAIMAN

Susan Traiman is director of the Education Initiative at The Business Roundtable (BRT) in Washington, D.C. She oversees the BRT's education reform activities for chief executive officers of leading corporations interested in improving student achievement and raising academic standards in the United States. Ms. Traiman has had over 25 years of experience as an education reformer working with educators, federal and state policymakers, and business leaders.

Prior to joining The Business Roundtable, she was education policies studies director at the National Governors Association (NGA) where she coordinated assistance to governors in developing and implementing systemic education reform strategies. At NGA, she participated in planning the 1989 National Education Summit in Charlottesville, Va., and the subsequent development of National Education Goals. Ms. Traiman was a senior associate with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement where she designed and managed a system for tracking and reporting on state and local education reform initiatives. She served on the staff of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, contributing to the development of its 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. Ms. Traiman came to Washington, D.C., from New Jersey where she was a teacher and a consultant at a regional service center of the New Jersey Department of Education.

She received a bachelor's degree in American civilization and a master's degree in education from the University of Pennsylvania.

JENNIFER VRANEK

Jennifer Vranek is the executive director of the Partnership for Learning, a statewide nonprofit education policy organization dedicated to building support for education reform among Washington State's policymakers, educators, civic leaders and the public. Founded in 1995 by then-Lieutenant Governor Joel Pritchard and former Boeing Company Chairman and CEO Frank Shrontz, this unique partnership has gained a national reputation for its public engagement campaign.

Previously, Ms. Vranek was the director of Benchmarking and State Services for Achieve, Inc. located in Washington, D.C. Achieve is a bipartisan, nonprofit education policy organization directed by governors and corporate chief executives to help states raise standards and performance in America's schools. At Achieve, Ms. Vranek directed successful benchmarking projects with more than 15 states, working closely with state education superintendents, governors and business executives to benchmark state education reforms and share best practices. She also was a key staff member in the planning, preparation and follow-up activities for the 2001 and 1999 National Education Summits, hosted by Achieve.

In addition, Ms. Vranek planned and launched a two-year, $2.4 million project spearheaded by Achieve in collaboration with the Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the

National Alliance of Business to help states close the gap between current high school graduation standards and college/employer admissions. Among her other accomplishments, she extensively analyzed international mathematics and science achievement, curriculum materials, and examinations as part of her work to launch MAP, a multistate collaboration to dramatically improve mathematics performance in the middle grades.

Before joining Achieve in 1997, Ms. Vranek was a research assistant at AFT. Among other projects, she was a principal researcher for *Making Standards Matter*, an annual AFT report evaluating the quality of the academic standards, assessments and accountability policies in the 50 states, and *Setting Higher Sights*, a comparative analysis of the quality of mathematics assessments in the United States and abroad. Previously, Ms. Vranek lived in Brasilia, Brazil, where she learned Portuguese and was a project consultant to the World Bank's G-7 Pilot Program to Conserve the Brazilian Rainforest. She also served as the administrative secretary to the Board of Directors of the American School of Brasilia.

A graduate of the public schools in San Antonio, Texas, Ms. Vranek holds a master's degree from the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute and a bachelor's degree in history with minors in music and public policy from the College of William and Mary.

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APPENDIX C: INTERVIEWS

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